

Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature

Volume 5
Number 2 *Winter 2006*

Article 1

Winter 2006

Review of Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell.

Anat Pick
University of East London

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl>
[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Pick, Anat (2006). Review of "Review of Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell.," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 5 : No. 2
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol5/iss2/1>

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol5/iss2/1>

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

**Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.
120 pp. ISBN 0804747377.**

Reviewed by Anat Pick, University of East London

The Shape of Things to Come

In our culture, the decisive political conflict, which governs every other conflict, is that between the animality and the humanity of man. That is to say, in its origin Western politics is also biopolitics. (*The Open* 80)

I. Shapes of the Apocalypse

The Open begins at the end. Its first image is that of men with animal heads, symbols of an apocalyptic hybridity of species at the end of historical time:

[t]he messianic banquet of the righteous on the last day. Under the shades of paradisiacal trees and cheered by the music of two players, the righteous, with crowned heads, sit at a richly laid table. The idea that in the days of the Messiah the righteous, who for their entire lives have observed the prescriptions of the Torah, will feast on the meat of Leviathan and Behemoth without worrying whether their slaughter has been kosher or not is perfectly familiar to the rabbinic tradition. What is surprising, however, is one detail that we have not yet mentioned: beneath the crowns, the miniaturist has represented the righteous not with human faces, but with unmistakably animal heads. (*The Open* 1-2)

This scene of the vision of Ezekiel, depicted in a thirteenth-century Hebrew Bible in the Ambrosian Library in Milan, offers a version of the shape of things to come. Indeed, Agamben's subsequent ploughing through Western philosophy ultimately concerns this very question of *shape*: the shape of bodies, the shape of cultural and political institutions, and finally too the shape of thought itself at the end of time.

In contemporary neo-liberal lingo, the future—by far our most popular tense—must itself soon make way or open up to some post-historical clearing, marking the completion of our human tasks under the auspices of global (messianic) capitalism. The question of the future is, Agamben shows, the question of "our" future; it is, in other words, a question which concerns the human, the destiny and identity of species. Since the issue is also one of future visuals, it is worth citing the burgeoning body of popular scientific literature on the subject of human cloning, reproductive technology, and genetic engineering as crucial scenarios of the shape of things to come: Francis Fukuyama's *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, Gregory Stock's *Redesigning Humans: Our Inevitable Genetic Future*, or Lee Silver's eschatologically titled *Remaking Eden*, to name but a few. *The Open* walks a temporal tightrope between classical antiquity, Judeo-Christian and Gnostic visions of the End, and the rampant futurism of the contemporary "life sciences" and "life politics."

Alongside the vision of Ezekiel, Agamben cites a second image of life at the end of time—the well known idyll of *Isaiah* (II: 6): "the wolf shall live with the sheep, / and the leopard lie down with the kid; / the calf and the young lion shall grow up together, / *and the little child shall lead them*" (qtd. in Agamben 3; my emphasis). The scene seems to depict a vegetarian utopia, marshaled benevolently by a humanity that has blissfully regressed to childhood.

Whereas the messianic scene in *Ezekiel* involves the righteous carelessly feasting on the flesh of Leviathan and the Behemoth, the scene from *Isaiah* seems to herald the end of carnivorousness in humans and animals alike. In both cases, though, carnivorousness is acknowledged as problematic and thus requires some form of sanctioning. In modern Judaism, for instance, Rabbi Kook (1865-1935) believed that the coming of the Messiah (in a future beyond all futures) will end all eating of animal flesh. And although Agamben does not explicitly comment on the vast networks that currently manage human control and consumption of animal bodies (as food, clothing, or in scientific research), it is these networks which arguably form the backbone of contemporary biopolitics. The mechanisms of total control over animal life and death ought, I believe, to be thought as the most salient feature of the current mode of production of the human by the anthropological machine.

The messianic prophecy of *Isaiah*, which discloses a changed relationship between the species, what Agamben calls "a different economy of relations between animal and human" (*The Open* 3), recalls a passing anecdote in Primo Levi's *The Truce*. In the first days of the liberation of Auschwitz, Levi remembers a cow sent by the Russian army to feed the survivors of the camp. Here too, in a sort of freakish reworking of *Isaiah*, the animal is led by a child. The cow is immediately set upon by the famished crowd, ripped to shreds, and eaten:

About midday a frightened child appeared, dragging a cow by the halter; he made us understand that it was for us, that the Russians had sent it, then he abandoned the beast and fled like a bolt. I don't know how, but within minutes the poor animal was slaughtered, gutted and quartered and its remains distributed to all the corners of the camp where survivors nestled. (*The Truce* 191)

Was Levi thinking of this scene in *Isaiah* when he noted the doomed cow, the "poor animal," whose violent death is oddly simultaneous, perhaps even synonymous with, the liberation of Auschwitz? The scene from *The Truce* and the prophecy of *Isaiah* suggest parallel emancipations: the liberation of Auschwitz marked the *Häftlinge*'s return to history and humanity, while the Biblical vision glimpses a final escape from history and from the dictates of species.

Levi's choice of anecdote, then, partly equates "liberation" with the recuperation by the survivors of their (suspended, vanquished) humanity. The human, reintroduced into the world a scene earlier in the form of the robust Russian soldiers on horseback (*The Truce* 187-88), could now be reclaimed by the camp's debased, dehumanized prisoners. Is it not significant that this return of the human, like the return of the repressed, is marked for Levi by the furious destruction of an animal? If it may seem gratuitous to present this scene from *The Truce* and the prophecy of *Isaiah* as twin (in)versions of human liberation, any irony with respect to the meaning of "liberation" and the recuperation of humanity is, significantly, Levi's own.

Levi's unflinching account of camp reality *and* of the aftermath of "liberation" is so disturbing precisely because it refuses the neat spatial and temporal divisions of inside/outside, before/after that govern much of our moral-historical understanding of the Holocaust, its collective legacies of commemoration and remembrance. That the end of the horrific violence of Auschwitz is, in Levi's accounts, both preceded and followed by more violence makes the whole world (before and beyond the specificity of *these* death camps) into a concentration camp. Moreover, and this is where Agamben's post-Holocaust philosophy makes its entrance, humanity is the crucial wager on which turn the great wheels of the European-humanist "anthropological machine." This machine, Agamben explains, produces the human again and again via a suspension (and physical mastering) of the non-human and the animal—both the nonhuman *within* the human, and, I would insist, the nonhuman *without*. Herein rests the central aporia of human identity, an internal wound or "caesura"—the open—which shapes Western culture's entire political, judicial, and philosophical apparatus. And in this sense too, the Nazi death camps become exemplary manifestations of the operation of the modern European anthropological machine:

Perhaps concentration and extermination camps are also an experiment of this sort, an extreme and monstrous attempt to decide between the human and the inhuman, which has ended up dragging the very possibility of the distinction to its ruin. (*The Open* 22)

In the West, consciousness, in both its historical and post-historical modes, is preoccupied (perhaps obsessed) with the relationship between humanity and animality. The anthropological machine toils incessantly to enforce and regulate a strict cartography of species on which rests, entirely precariously, the identity of the human.

Against this double backdrop—of the brutal apotheosis of Western biopolitics in the event of the Holocaust, and the messianic visions of the end of man—*The Open* reaches inside the engine of the anthropological machine, in a gesture of willful sabotage.

II. "The Open Wound That Is My Life"

The Open is structured around a series of densely scholastic philosophical vignettes, threading their way between a range of ancient, medieval, and modern texts. After positing the question of the shape of post-historical man (as seen in the Ambrosian Library, and as taken up by thinkers like Kojève and Bataille) Agamben turns his attention to the origins of Western conceptions of the human, and to the relentless operation of the anthropological machine.

One of Agamben's main starting points, in *The Open* and in his other works, is Foucault's notion of biopower. Agamben regards biopower, defined as the sovereign's taking on the care and management of the biological life-functions of the citizenry, as the basis of Western politics as such, and not, as Foucault saw it, as a distinct feature of modern State power. As early as Aristotle, Agamben shows, human life is determined, not as a substance or an essence, but through a sequence of strategic divisions between "nutritive" or "vegetative" life (what Agamben will call, after Walter Benjamin, "bare life"), those basic physiological functions common to plants, animals, and humans, and "relational life" of the so-called higher animals, by which living beings relate to their surroundings.

Human life is, then, reached through a series of *separations* between the various life functions: "vegetal and relational, organic and animal, animal and human [...]" (15). But, continues Agamben,

It is possible to oppose man to other living things, and at the same time to organize the complex—and not always edifying—economy of relations between men and animals, only because something like an animal life has been separated within man, only because his distance and proximity to the animal have been measured and recognized first of all in the closest and most intimate place. (15-16)

Human life is only thinkable, therefore, as a bracketing off of raw or bare life, and then of animal life, *inside* the human itself: "the caesura between the human and the animal passes first of all within man [...]" (16). The human, traditionally conceived as the *conjunction* between body and soul, is here shown to derive, on the contrary, from ongoing processes of *internal separation*. For Agamben this shift from conjunction to separation is of crucial importance:

What is man, if he is always the place—and, at the same time, the result—of ceaseless divisions and caesurae? It is more urgent to work on these divisions, to ask in what way—within man—has man been separated from non-man, and the animal from the human, than it is to take positions on the great issues, on so-called human rights and values. (16)

It is worth repeating that this fundamental conception of man is neither unified nor fixed, nor does it suggest a realm of positive plenitude. Man is grasped here, negatively and non-definitively, as a "mobile border," an "intimate caesura" (15). *The Open* sets out to think inside, and pass beyond, the internal rift of division.

The more unstable the boundaries that delineate and secure a human domain, the more brutally (and desperately) these boundaries are fleshed out and imposed: "everything happens as if, in our culture, life were *what cannot be defined, yet, precisely for this reason, must be ceaselessly articulated and divided*" (13). For Agamben, then, the blood-drenched history of the West, and specifically that of Europe (which is at the center of Agamben's intellectual and historical universe), is the sum of powerful attempts at border control by which the imaginary confines of human life are imposed through acts of serial expulsion, exception, and exclusion, and by which "nonhuman life" is violently eliminated. The open—that figure of emptiness, an ontological vacuum, or, to borrow Bataille's description of his own life, an "open wound" (qtd. in *The Open* 7), neither human nor animal—is the book's proper if peculiar destination, a blank zone in whose dark light Agamben will later tentatively feel his way out of the bloody humanist conundrum.

Agamben's excursions into the hollow of the interval are, then, significant on several counts: they cast a shadow over the presumed integrity of the human, an integrity appealed to and endlessly invoked by the reigning discourse of human rights. More radically still, Agamben argues (in this work and elsewhere) that the ceaseless process of differentiation between human and nonhuman life *within* and *without* man is now the principal function of liberal democracies, geared as they increasingly seem to be toward the "total management of biological life" (77). This is what Agamben means in urging us to "investigate not the metaphysical mystery of

conjunction [the Cartesian dualism of body and mind], but rather *the practical and political mystery of separation*" (16; my emphasis).

This separation between the different life-functions (vegetative, animal, human) caused some concern among early theologians. In *The Open*'s fifth vignette, "Physiology of the Blessed" (17-19), Agamben focuses on the problem of human physiology after the Resurrection: "How should the vital functions of the paradisiacal body be conceived?" (18). The problem was one of deciding the fate of animal bodily functions (nourishment and procreation) in the afterlife. Are these (lowly) functions to happily assume their place in Eternity? The resurrection of body parts (intestines, genitals) signals trouble in Paradise. For, as blessed, bodily functions such as defecation and fornication risk turning Paradise into some divine orgiastic brothel, or else risk overrunning it with a steadily growing number of people and their excrement (a predicament all too reminiscent of life on earth).

Thomas Aquinas responds to this sanitary challenge by solemnly banishing all bodily functions from Paradise, and declaring the contemplative life of man as the singular goal of resurrection. "In the body of the resurrected," he writes, "the animal functions will remain 'idle and empty'" (qtd. in Agamben 19). For Aquinas, "animal life is excluded from Paradise," and "blessed life is in no case an animal life. Consequently, even plants and animals will not find a place in Paradise: 'they will corrupt both in their whole and in their parts'" (*The Open* 19). Christianity's hostility toward nature, animals, and the body, which so infuriated Nietzsche, is here perfectly expressed. This too is biopower, and Aquinas' celestial policing of the corporeal shall later assume its earthly form in the sophisticated structures of Western biopolitics. Indeed, one may ponder the ascetic rationale that seems to drive the biotechnological revolution of (human) cloning and genetic engineering, both of which precisely set out to make redundant "the two principal functions of animal life—nutrition and generation [...]" (18). Once sex and eating become fully detached from the vital life functions of nutrition and procreation, humanity would finally inhabit a post-historical space of resurrection, as Aquinas defined it. Eating, defecation, and sex may soon, quite literally, be history.

III. The Optical Machine

The Open moves freely between theological, scientific and philosophical texts with the aim of tracing a consistent itinerary across the time and space of Western culture. Agamben's argument is that the intellectual, political, and scientific endeavors of the West cohere around the fundamental human/animal divide. Western logic, history, and culture do not merely take up the question of species as one of their concerns; they *are* themselves precisely the variations on this paramount (and primary) theme.

Agamben looks to the father of modern taxonomy, Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) who (long before Darwin) in his *Systema Naturae*, first published in 1735, noted the inessential difference between humans and apes. As a natural scientist, Linnaeus could identify "hardly [...] a single distinguishing mark which separates man from the apes, save for the fact that the latter have an empty space between their canines and their other teeth" (Linnaeus qtd. in Agamben 24).

But Linnaeus' clever twist has less to do with his rejection of the human as either a substance or a species, and more to do with his positing the human, tentatively enough, at the other end of an imperative: *nosce te ipsum* (know thyself). No ready-made or given humanity nestles at the heart of *Homo sapiens*, there is only the (optional) dictum to recognize oneself as human. Here again is the interval, the open, whose very emptiness demands self-recognition, and which then and only then, gives rise to the human:

[t]o define the human not through any *nota characteristic*, but rather through this self-knowledge, means that man is the being which recognizes itself as such, that *man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human*. (26)

Humanity must be self-knowingly claimed *via animality*, or as Derrida famously put it: "the animal that therefore I am." Failure to see the animal in the human is, then, necessarily also a failure to claim human subjectivity and identity, since one remains blind to the very nature of the human *as an act of self-recognition*.

Homo sapiens, then, is neither a clearly defined species nor a substance; it is, rather, a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human. [...] It is an optical machine constructed of a series of mirrors in which man, looking at himself, sees his own image always already deformed in the features of an ape. *Homo* is a constitutively "anthropomorphous" animal (that is, "resembling man," [...]), who must recognize himself in non-man in order to be human. [...] In Linnaeus' optical machine, whoever refuses to recognize himself in the ape, becomes one [...]. (26-27)

Linnaeus' charm lay in the wickedly ironic formulation of the visual epiphany which prompts man to actively mould himself out of the features of an ape. "The anthropological machine of humanism" is thus a thoroughly

[i]ronic apparatus that verifies the absence of a nature proper to *Homo*, holding him suspended between a celestial and a terrestrial nature, between animal and human—and thus, his being always less and more than himself. (*The Open* 29)

People who ardently deny that they are animals ironically display, in this very refusal, their own relinquished animality: for Linnaeus, "whoever refuses to recognize himself in the ape, becomes one: to paraphrase Pascal, *qui fait l'homme, fait le singe* {he who acts the man, acts the ape}" (*The Open* 27). Put differently, in the Heideggerian terms that will soon overtake the discussion, such people do not see the open in which is revealed to man his own animal "captivation," the modality of "undisconcealed" relation to his environment, and ultimately to his own being.

The tangled recognitions of human-nonhuman remind us that man cannot emerge from outside of his proximity to the animal; that these two "moments" of humanity and animality are contemporaneous without, however, becoming subsumed in one another; that the drama of the human unfolds in that proximate gap in which human and animal are drawn together ever nearer, only to withdraw again.

The Open's central question "What is man?" is uncomfortably answered: man, that crown of creation, "has neither essence nor specific vocation [...]" (30). Man is at best, as Linnaeus pointed out, anthropomorphous or "manlike" (30). Three centuries before Linnaeus, the Italian Renaissance scholar Giovanni Pico (1463-1494) expressed man's lack of a fixed identity by calling him *nostrum chamaeleonata*, "our chameleon" (Pico qtd. in Agamben 30). Pico's "manifesto of humanism," commonly, and, Agamben emphasizes, erroneously, known as the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, in effect pronounces the "transience and inhumanity of the human" (30).

Around this permanent hiatus, the space of indecision, between man and non-man, the anthropological machine swings into action, and its paradoxical nature comes into view. The machine produces the human, but in so doing it also produces the nonhuman exception:

In so far as the production of man through the opposition man/animal, human/inhuman, is at stake here, the machine necessarily functions by means of an exclusion (which is also already a capturing) and an inclusion (which is also always already an exclusion). (37)

This symmetrical play of binaries, between inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion, is a little too neatly divided by Agamben into two temporal variants of the anthropological machine: ancient and modern (37). The modern machine safeguards the human by isolating and expelling a nonhuman inside. An "inhuman other" is thus a result of internal exclusion and animalization. The ancient model works the other way around, by including an outside. The nonhuman in this case is conceived as "an animal in human form" (37). For Agamben the modern "other" par excellence is the Jew, a pronouncement that raises doubts about the sort of universality Agamben attributes to the particular history of continental Europe. Meanwhile, the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner are examples of the manufactured exceptions of the older form of the machine. Here, it is the temporal restriction which is misleading, since slavery, foreignness and barbarism continue to exist in contemporary forms. That said, Agamben states that the anthropological machine "in its two variants, ancient and modern—is at work in our culture" (37). The machine produces the human defined against a zone of utter exclusion, a zone delineating "neither an animal life nor a human life, but only a life that is separated and excluded from itself—only a *bare life*" (38). This procedure continually rearticulates the human through a series of exclusions and expulsions. The fleeting, illusory cohesion of the human depends on the liminal space of exception as the threshold of social and political order. Those beings whose life has been stripped bare no longer fall within any judicial, moral, or political domain, and they can thus be dispensed with:

And faced with this extreme figure of the human and the inhuman, it is not so much a matter of asking which of the two machines (or of the two variants of the same machine) is better or more effective—or, rather, less lethal and bloody—as it is of understanding how they work so that we might, eventually, be able to stop them. (38)

IV. The Ontological Machine

A sizeable portion of *The Open* is devoted to the explication of Heidegger's "triple thesis" (51), in which he memorably claimed that "the stone is worldless [*weltlos*]; the animal is poor in world

[*weltarm*]; man is world-forming [*weltbildend*]" (51). Chapters Twelve-Fifteen on Heidegger follow a brief introduction of the work of zoologist Jakob von Uexküll (and his now famous tick, which so delighted Gilles Deleuze). Uexküll found in nature not a unity but a radical variety of incommensurable perceptual worlds, which coexist (and co-depend) without, however, inhabiting a common space or time, and without the possibility of communication. Uexküll's radical antihumanism, his refusal to afford primacy to a humanoid, anthropocentric perspective, greatly appealed to Heidegger, whom Agamben calls "the philosopher of the twentieth century who more than any other strove to separate man from the living being [...]" (39).

Uexküll's observations on the blind, deaf and tasteless tick's seamless relationship with her surroundings find an echo in Heidegger's own formulation of the animal's "captivation"—its subsumption, so to speak, in its "disinhibitor" (an element that makes up the animal's environment). Despite the tick's limited perception of her surrounding (having only the senses of smell, touch, and sensitivity to temperature), the tick is "united in these three elements in an intense and passionate relationship the likes of which we might never find in the relations that bind man to his apparently much richer world. The tick *is* this relationship; she lives only in it and for it" (47).

An animal's absorption in its environment, claims Heidegger, is a modality of relation that does not grasp the being of things, and therefore cannot be said to constitute a "world." Man on the other hand is world-forming because he relates to things in their being. That is, things offer themselves to human thought *as* things. It is as if, in opposition to animal captivity, man's separation from the elements that surround him allows man to transcend mere immediate environment, and make up a world. Human openness unto a world of beings is for Heidegger a relation of wealth and plenitude, whereas animal immersion in its environment is considered "poor." But one could just as easily turn this evaluation around and ask whether man's ontological apprehension of the being of things is not infinitely poorer than the animal's embeddedness in her environment. The question of ontology, and of the transcending of the order of being, will provide Agamben with his final glimpse of redemption. If, as Heidegger has shown, the drama between man and animal is at bottom an ontological one, imagining a changed interspecies relationship would entail either an ontological resolution, or else ontological resignation—some form of "letting be," or perhaps more drastically still, a letting go of being altogether.

Despite separating the human from the animal, a striking proximity between them is disclosed in the state Heidegger calls "profound boredom." In boredom, humans find themselves "delivered over to things that refuse themselves" (65); that is to say, boredom binds us to things that nonetheless offer us nothing. Being bored is, then, being *captivated* by that which does not concern us and for which we find no use, just as the animal is taken up by things that refuse their revelation and remain closed-off and concealed. But that is not all, for boredom rather wonderfully turns out to be a kind of ontological threshold which explains both *Dasein's* intimacy with the animal *and* its potentiality for openness to the being of things. It is against the backdrop of indifference and suspension that characterize the bored person's relation to the things around her, that a *possibility* and *potentiality* of *Dasein's* relation to things as beings may be clearly grasped. If it is true that animals can never be bored (and one wonders, for instance,

about domestic and captive animals, whose behavior, at least outwardly, resembles boredom), this is because the animal is unable to

suspend and deactivate its relationship with the ring of its specific disinhibitors. The animal environment is constituted in such a way that something like a pure possibility can never become manifest in it. Profound boredom appears as the metaphysical operator in which the passage from poverty in world to world, from animal environment to human world, is realized. (68)

Boredom is the condition of possibility for *Dasein's* world-forming capacities. "What is man?"—that vexed question that fuels both the anthropological machine and Agamben's philosophical spanner in its works—is here answered: man is "simply an animal that has learned to become bored" (70). In a final twist, the human resides in a suspension of animality. An animal

who has awakened *from* its captivation *to* its own captivation. This awakening of the living being to its own being-captivated, this anxious and resolute opening to a not-open, is the human. (70)

Here we have moved from Linnaeus' optical machine to Heidegger's ontological one. What has remained in both versions of this human production device is *irony*, for in both the optical and the ontological machine, the human is nothing more than the self-reflexive recognition (of his own) animality: seeing the man in the features of an ape (Linnaeus), or setting apart and setting free one's own ontological captivation (Heidegger). Being human is putting animality on hold.

V. The Open: "saved night"

At the end of this essay, I wish to return to where Agamben, and I, started out—to the question of the shape of things to come, and to the animal-headed figures in the Ambrosian library. What are we finally to make of these apocalyptic hybrids? For Agamben, at the end of his philosophical journey, the

righteous with the animal heads in the miniature in the Ambrosian do not represent a new declension of the man-animal relation so much as a figure of the "great ignorance" which lets both of them be outside of being, saved precisely in their being unsavable. Perhaps there is still a way in which living beings can sit at the messianic banquet of the righteous without taking on a historical task and without setting the anthropological machine into action. (92)

And yet again, can we not see in the hybrids an eerie foreshadowing of our great biotechnological posthuman ventures—genetic engineering, cloning, and reproductive technologies? Do not the humans with the animal heads call up what in his essay, "A Pitiless Art," Paul Virilio provocatively described as "the fundamentally expressionist nature of genetic engineering" (*Art and Fear* 58)? Scientific chimeras may on first glance *resemble* redeemed humanity at the End of Time, but their true essence is that of Nazi biopolitics. As Virilio puts it:

geneticists are now using cloning in the quest for the *chimera*, the hybridization of man and animal [...] such transgenic practices, aim at nothing less than to embark BIOLOGY on the road to a kind of 'expressionism' whereby teratology will no longer be content just to study malformations, but will resolutely set off in quest of their chimeric reproduction. [...]. Which is only in keeping with what was already being produced by the German Expressionism denounced by René Gimpel. But also, first and foremost, by the horror of the laboratories of the extermination camps. (*Art and Fear* 51-52)

Far from signaling a new relationship between humanity and animality, in other words, the hybrids of modern science signal the complete control over the animality of man.

Of biopolitics Agamben somberly explains that

[i]t is not easy to say whether the humanity that has taken upon itself the mandate of the total management of its own animality is still human, in the sense of that *humanitas* which the anthropological machine produced by de-ciding every time between man and animal; nor is it clear whether the well-being of a life that can no longer be recognized as either human or animal can be felt as fulfilling. (77)

Agamben continues, by way of Heidegger, that a limitless biopolitics paradoxically threatens to collapse the very distinction between human and animal, which the basic divisions of life have sought to establish:

To be sure, such a humanity, from Heidegger's perspective, no longer has the form of keeping itself open to the undisconcealed of the animal, but seeks rather to open and secure the not-open in every domain, and thus closes itself to its own openness, forgets its *humanitas*, and makes being its specific disinhibitor [that is, no longer relates to being *qua* being and beings]. The total humanization of the animal coincides with a total animalization of man. (77)

Early on in *The Open*, Agamben warned against such a collapse of differences under the law of blind *physis*:

When the difference vanishes and the two terms collapse upon each other—as seems to be happening today—the difference between being and the nothing, licit and illicit, divine and demonic also fades away, and in its place something appears for which we seem to lack even a name. (22)

Are we perhaps already there? One name for this collapse is—Agamben has already said it—"Auschwitz"; another, even less comfortably, might be: "factory farming." Be that as it may, in these passages Agamben sounds the humanist. Unlike Heidegger, however, Agamben's task is not "the separation of man from the living being," but, and still on cue with Heidegger, a "letting be," an altered, and less ferocious, relation between man and animal (91).

Here, in the book's final chapter entitled "Outside of Being," Agamben neatly summarizes Heidegger; then moves effortlessly beyond him, and beyond ontology. The following passage is a slick recap of the trajectory in full:

only with man can there be something like being, and beings become accessible and manifest. Thus, *the supreme category of Heidegger's ontology is stated: letting be*. In this project, man makes himself free for the possible, and in delivering himself over to it, *lets the world and beings be* as such. However, if our reading has hit the mark, if man can open a world and free a possible only because, in the experience of boredom, he is able to suspend and deactivate the animal relationship with the disinhibitor, if at the center of the open lies the undisconcealedness of the animal, then at this point we must ask: what becomes of this relationship? *In what way can man let the animal, upon whose suspension the world is held open, be?* (91; my emphasis)

What initially reads like the extraction of an ontological ethics of "letting be" is, in fact, a farewell to ontology - *a letting go of being*. It is significant that at this point Agamben's text leaves behind philosophy and biology and turns to Walter Benjamin (whose collected writings in the Italian edition Agamben edited from 1975 to 1994), Titian, and, very nearly, to Gnostic mysticism.

Despite its pessimism, or perhaps because of it, *The Open's* closing sections intimate a way beyond the designated regions of exception marked out by the anthropological machine and the cacophonous chugging of its wheels. The strategy is explicitly *esoteric*: it is no longer a matter of explicating the role and function of the "open," but of entering into it, of inhabiting the interval. The open, which recurs in this small book in a string of supplementary guises—open wound, pure exception, abdication, remainder, and suspension—becomes in its final incarnation what Walter Benjamin called the "saved night."

Benjamin evokes "an entirely different image of the relationship between man and nature and between nature and history: an image in which the anthropological machine seems to be completely out of play" (81). Nature, Benjamin writes, need not be illuminated, mastered, and overcome. Thought, language, and representation need not serve an economy of redemption that ascribes meaning to nature and forces open its secrets in pursuit of some lost paradise, as either a return to prelapsarian harmony, or as the total management of nonhuman life. Humanity's relationship with nature must be radically revaluated so that

neither must man master nature nor nature man. Nor must both be surpassed in a third term that would represent their dialectical synthesis. Rather, according to the Benjaminian model of a "dialectic at a standstill," what is decisive here is only the "between," the interval or, we might say, the play between the two terms, their immediate constellation in a non-coincidence. (83)

Works of art that give shape to Benjamin's conception of such a halted and nocturnal relationship between humanity and nature feature

a nature that awaits no day, and thus no Judgment Day; they are models of a nature that is neither the theatre of history nor the dwelling place of man. The saved night. (81)

One such artwork is Titian's painting, *Nymph and Shepherd* (circa 1570), which shows a nude nymph and a shepherd, "at once promiscuous and remote" (86). In its composition, coloring, and tone, this painting approaches the meaning of Benjamin's space between (or beyond) nature and the human, a space in which the lovers shrug their shoulders at the dialectic of openness and concealment which, in its hopeless bid against nature, continues to pointlessly and painfully fabricate the human. The "saved night" to which Titian's lovers have been transported is a space of resignation, reconciliation, and forgiveness. The saved night "gather[s] creatural life not in order to reveal it, nor open it to human language, but rather to give it back to its closedness and muteness" (81). This "creaturely" space is precisely neither animal nor human, but a kind of *sentient neutrality*.

Benjamin's saved night locates salvation outside of revelation: salvation as acceptance of the impossibility of salvation, an acceptance of nocturnal unknowability as the absence of mystery. This marks an end to the pursuit of the exceptional parameters of "human" life, and an opening unto life that is neither human nor animal (neither open nor concealed), and which cannot, therefore, be revealed and "saved." From "letting be" (Heidegger) to a letting go of being (Benjamin) in which the "central emptiness" between man and animal is reached as a (Gnostic) non-knowledge.

The jarring ironies of the anthropological machine are laid to rest, and a strange nocturnal peace descends. In the stillness and darkness that ensue, dwell *creatures*—living beings—neither human nor animal, whose lives unfold otherwise, "outside of being." It is certainly difficult to picture this life outside a human/animal divide, out of the dialectic of concealment and revelation. Agamben's allusion to an embracing of a (quasi mystical) non-knowledge in which "life" would resign itself to its own "nonsavability" and let go of the order of being altogether, remains seductively cryptic. What Benjamin and Agamben's "night vision" might mean *politically* is even harder to define. It follows, though, that "politics" as such would look and feel rather different, morphed into something without, as yet, a name or a shape. But Agamben insists we must try to see in the dark,

To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man will therefore mean no longer to seek new—and more effective or more authentic—articulations, but rather to show the central emptiness, the hiatus that—within man—separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in this emptiness: the suspension of the suspension, Shabbat of both animal and man. (92)

Working out a new grammar of being is *The Open*'s open task, and so even in its final intimations of redemption, *The Open* remains a deeply pessimistic book. Its power, beauty, and its certain sadness lie in the call to "risk ourselves in this emptiness," to practice "the suspension of the suspension": from an animal that has learned to be bored, man must perhaps now learn to become an animal that is bored by boredom.

Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. *The Open: Man and Animal*. Kevin Attell, trans. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004.

Levi, Primo. *If This is a Man, The Truce*. Stuart Woolf, trans. London: Abacus, 2003.

Virilio, Paul. *Art and Fear*. Julie Rose, trans. London: Continuum, 2003.